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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: A RETURN TO REGIONAL ELECTORAL POLITICS

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CLASSIFIED BY CHARGE TIM ANDREWS. REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (D).

11. (C) Summary: A current snapshot of presidential electioneering shows two contesting strategies, one devised by the President's camp, the other by his strongest opposition. The President appears content to steamroll the PDP nomination through tightening his grip on the party apparatus. To win the general election, his team will exploit the powers of incumbency, cut as many "mutual support pacts" with other incumbents as possible, and attempt to keep the opposition fragmented. On the other side of the battlements, the most serious opposition strategy hearkens to the regionally-centered electoral calculus of the past. Powerbrokers are huddling to recreate the Northwest-Southeast axis that formed the winning presidential ticket in every election save 1993 and 1999. However, selecting a ticket palatable to most key opposition players will be difficult. Another possible twist is whether the presidential candidate will be from the Southeast (Igbo), with the running mate from the Northwest. Both inherently cynical and overtly power-driven, these strategies discount the average voter and eschew substantive issues. In doing so, they throttle genuine democratization and may exacerbate disillusionment among large segments of public. End Summary.

A HISTORIC CHANCE BEING SPENT

12. (C) The 1999 election was as much a referendum against continued military rule as it was a vote for Obasanjo. Handed the blank canvas of this negative mandate, Obasanjo came to office with high hopes on the public's part that he could paint a picture of a more democratic, productive Nigeria. However, he has failed to develop a positive mandate, and his supporters increasingly cast the next elections in negative terms also: Don't let the bad guys come back.

13. (C) Reftel A mentioned that Obasanjo needed to devote more attention to taking care of domestic policy imperatives and mending political fences. This meant fewer journeys abroad and more consultations at home. He apparently did not read our cable. In June alone, he will take four international trips, some of them with multiple destinations. We have not heard reports of him saying "sorry" to any of the political figures on whose toes he has stepped during the past three years. His popularity continues to flag. Recently a group of National Assembly members from Obasanjo's PDP wrote party chairmen Ogbeh threatening to bolt from the party if Obasanjo won the party nomination. Ogbeh has reportedly told the President that 15 of the 21 PDP governors would prefer a different Presidential nominee (This would be a blow to Obasanjo's strategy. It also may be a reason that the Presidency appears to be rethinking the utility of the deal Obasanjo cut with the Governors to hold local government elections in August.).

14. (C) Obasanjo has even managed to fall out with Senate President Anyim, previously considered one of the most loyal tools in the presidential shed. Anyim has tacitly supported the recent impeachment motion against Obasanjo in the Senate. While the motion will likely exhaust itself, the estrangement of Anyim demonstrates Obasanjo has not lost his penchant for turning friends into enemies.

15. (C) People acknowledge that he works hard but they question his sincerity, priorities and effectiveness. For

many people, he gives the impression of a man feverishly running in place when he is not running in a circle. Because he is guilty of angering the high and disenchanting the humble, he does not have much goodwill. For an incumbent whose administration has not lived up to expectation, this is a severe vulnerability. If he had retained sufficient goodwill, it would be easy for people to excuse him by reasoning that the job is very tough or that Obasanjo was doing his best but has been ill served by his advisors. Right now, most people see the federal government as an extension of Obasanjo's personality and view its failures as reflecting his own shortcomings.

16. (C) Outwardly, President Obasanjo seems oblivious to the political discontent around him. Part of the reason may be that his haughty character disallows much consideration of what lesser humans think of him. Another reason is that, in his political calculations, public opinion may not matter all that much. An American political consultant would advise Obasanjo that he needed to go out and win the people's minds if not hearts. Yet, Obasanjo does not seem primed to reach out and touch. The time is quickly dwindling for such a move to be effective. Soon, the intended audience would view any such overture as a last minute attempt to curry favor after over three years of indifference.

17. (C) To his critics, Obasanjo has behaved like an autocrat wearing democratic garments. What can be gleaned of his campaign strategy at this stage tends to confirm the characterization. The first rung of the game plan apparently is to suppress serious internal challenge to Obasanjo's renomination. This was the rationale behind the April pilgrimage to Obasanjo's farm in Ota by PDP stalwarts to "beg" the President to seek another term. That procession was engineered by Works Minister Tony Anenih, Nigeria's archetypal backroom politician. According to most observers, Anenih has not seen a deal he could not cut nor run across a principle he would not disavow if the price were right. Anenih, now second in command of the reelection campaign behind absentee Finance Minister Adamu Ciroma, is not above brandishing threats as well. According to one Northern governor, Anenih told PDP governors that they could expect plums from the Presidency for their personal consumption if they came out in support of Obasanjo. However, if they failed, they could expect much harsher tidings. In an ironic twist, the amoral Minister threatened state executives with being called before the anti-corruption panel.

18. (C) To help entice governors and other elected officials to support Obasanjo, the team wants to cut informal mutual support agreements with as many incumbents as possible. This tack seems to transcend party lines as the Obasanjo team has apparently wooed a few AD governors and maybe one or two APP state executives. Through these arrangements, the team hopes to use the interests of state and local candidates to campaign energetically on their own behalf at the grassroots level to Obasanjo's advantage. Thus far, this is the closest Obasanjo's strategy comes to reaching out to the electorate, but it is essentially by proxy. While indirect rule was the political system in colonial Nigeria, Obasanjo might just add the term "indirect campaigning" to the national lexicon.

19. (C) The third leg of his strategy is to fragment the opposition. Knowing that the toughest opposition is lodged in the North, Anenih has tried to coax a few older Northern politicians into the Obasanjo camp. The Obasanjo team has also tried to thwart Igbo solidarity. Senior-level Igbos in the Administration have tried to drive a wedge through Igbo land by discouraging talk of an Igbo presidency in 2003. Additionally, the President's team has welcomed the likes of the odious Senator Arthur Nzeribe who left the APP for the PDP. The rich and essentially selfish Nzeribe will back any government in power, as long as the price is right. He has publicly backed Obasanjo and will likely use his resources to pull other Igbos toward Obasanjo. Last, Obasanjo critics contend the Presidency, having lost the fight to restrict this electoral cycle to the PDP, AD and APP, will now pressure the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to register 5-10 new political parties. According to this theory, his team wants numerous opposition parties to prevent the President's foes from assembling under one roof. The President's supporters reportedly paid some senior UNDP and APP figures to scuttle the two parties' planned merger.

A COUNTER STRATEGY

110. (C) Obasanjo's failure to develop an electoral constituency and to present a compelling vision for the

future has both afflicted and helped his opponents. Because his cupboard is relatively bare, they have little need to fill theirs. Obasanjo's inability has made it easy for his detractors to sally backward and find their solutions in the politics of the past. His enemies have embraced the tried and tested strategy of forging an alliance of two of the three politically strategic regions, namely the North and the Southeast. Here, the North serves as a proxy for the Northwest, traditionally the politically potent part of the region.

11. Aside: Because of the importance affluence, status and age play in Nigerian politics, most of the key players are rich older men relatively conservative in outlook. Unsurprisingly, many would find succor in the politics of old rather than in diving into the uncertainty of a more egalitarian set-up. In a different way, Obasanjo also is guilty of superimposing the past on the present. Instead of being the consensus-building democrat people craved, Obasanjo has copied too liberally from how he ruled during the late seventies. What was appropriate then is passe now. Hailed as an enlightened military ruler years ago, he now is criticized by many as a quasi-autocrat with only superficial democratic attributes. End Aside.

ENEMIES TO THE NORTH OF HIM

12. (C) The North is where opposition runs deepest. Northern elites feel shortchanged under Obasanjo and fear their influence in national politics may be irretrievably lost should Obasanjo win another four years. Strategy-minded Northerners point out that the combination of Obasanjo-Atiku, representing the Southwest and the Northeast, respectively, is the antithesis of the regional axis that controlled national politics previously. In that Obasanjo has registered a lackluster performance and has allegedly betrayed their support by ignoring their interests, these Northerners see no reason not to revive the old political combine. Theirs is essentially a two-step strategy.

13. (C) First, they seek to coalesce Northern opinion. The vehicle for this endeavor is the Arewa Consultative Forum. The ACF is not yet united, however, as the rejection by many of Sokoto Governor Bafarawa's April speech to the ACF shows. But most Northerners do not reject Bafarawa's sharply anti-Obasanjo sentiment. The few Northerners who believe that the President should be re-elected (usually saying he is the least-bad person for the job) are coming under increasing pressure to keep their views to themselves. After tepidly endorsing Obasanjo earlier this year, Kaduna governor Ahmed Makarfi has been under heavy pressure to recant. Once seen as almost a shoe-in for reelection, Makarfi now faces strong opposition that has the support of key ACF leaders. A senior Northern politician claimed Makarfi and VP Atiku Abubakar were essentially run out of Kafanchan, in southern Kaduna State, during a recent campaign swing and that they were politely ignored by most people in Makarfi, the governor's home LGA. We cannot confirm this assertion.

14. (C) The second element of this plan is to reach out to the Southeast and as an alternative, the South-South. (The ethnic and political heterogeneity of the South-South makes that region a less cohesive bloc and thus a much less attractive partner.) Former Commonwealth Secretary General Emeka Anyaoku recently told us a delegation of northerners, including Sokoto's Bafarawa, visited him last year. They proposed a Northwest-Southeast alliance with him as the Presidential candidate. The gentlemanly Anyaoku declined the offer, saying that he had no appetite for the hurly-burly of Nigerian politics. However, there are more ambitious Igbo politicians waiting to chomp on that hook, most notably Shehu Shagari's Vice President, Alex Ekwueme. Ekwueme was to have succeeded Shagari in 1987, but his dream died when Muhammadu Buhari and Tunde Idiagbon seized power.

ENEMIES TO THE SOUTHEAST OF HIM

15. (C) The call for an Igbo president has matured from a relative murmur to a loud clamor. The lead social-cultural organization Ohaneze Ndigbo and other pan-Igbo groups have met. While the groups have not issued official statements, most leading members of the organizations have publicly endorsed the call. Miscalculations by President Obasanjo and Igbos in his administration unwittingly have fed the fire. Early on, Transportation Minister Maduekwe had his eyes on

the governor's seat in Abia State. Other Igbos in the Presidency wanted to undermine the growing popularity of Abia Governor Kalu to prevent his draw at home from eclipsing theirs. To combat this attack, which he felt had the Obasanjo seal of approval, Kalu sounded the clarion for an Igbo president. It was a masterstroke. By appealing to the yearning of the Igbo, who feel they have not be fully integrated into the political arena since the civil war, Kalu made himself the unofficial spokesperson for the entire tribe. This increased his popularity and made his detractors seem to be ethnic traitors. An attack on Kalu was perceived as an attack against the Igbo in general. Others began to pick up the call for the presidency to come to the Southeast. Now it has a life of its own, right at the heart of political discussion in the Southeast.

WILL THE OPPOSITION TWAIN MEET?

16. (C) While aversion to Obasanjo is strong in both the Northwest (and indeed most of the vast and populous former Northern Region) and Southeast, striking a deal will be difficult and will require many more late night negotiating sessions. The Igbos know they will have to deal with the North. However, they do not want to be the junior partner once again. The Igbos want the lead this time.

16. (C) The wisest and most experienced Northern elders (those no longer engaged in seeking political office) believe that the North must not try to re-assume the Presidency in 2003. They believe the best hope of sustaining Northern influence until 2007 lies in supporting an older, not too energetic Igbo (like Ekwueme) for President, with a younger Northerner as VP-cum-power behind the throne). They believe (probably correctly) that the Igbo will give 80-90% of their votes nationwide to a co-ethnic. Fearing that Obasanjo's supporters will try to rig elections, they view the enormous internal Igbo diaspora as a natural army of poll-watchers that will be able to keep the rigging to a minimum. Ambitious Northerners who want the keys to Aso Villa for themselves, however, ask why the old formula (Shagari/Ekwueme (civil rule) and Babangida/Aikhomu (military rule)) cannot serve as a tonic for the body politic today. This debate will continue among Northern actors for some time to come, but the trendline clearly favors an Igbo lead.

17. (C) To bolster their position in talks with the North, Igbo leaders are trying to line up the South-South's support. However, getting the fractious South-South politicians to agree on anything is difficult. Given historical animosities that date back to the transatlantic slave trade, getting South-South politicians to agree to support an Igbo leader for national office is a Herculean task. The South-South has, during Nigeria's post-colonial history, more often aligned with the North, specifically in order to advance the one interest upon which its diverse peoples seemingly can agree -- resisting domination by the more numerous and far more cohesive Igbo. For its part, the North, in order to retain leverage, is also discussing a South-South Presidency. Again, the possible candidates are older, relatively non-controversial figures. Septuagenarian Christian Onoh's name is one that surfaces occasionally.

18. (C) The predominantly Lagos-based Nigerian media harp on Northern domination of national politics. But Northerners have a different perspective. While conceding that generals and politicians from the North have disproportionately held the top job since independence, they argue that the North has tried since 1993 to engender greater balance. The North voted heavily for Abiola in 1993, they point out: Abiola even won his Kano-based opponent's LGA. The North lined up behind Obasanjo in 1999; even those opposed to Obasanjo and the PDP backed a candidate from the Southwest, Olu Falae. In return for their support of Obasanjo, they continue, their interests have been ignored. This was the essence of Bafarawa's screed. Many Northerners fear an Igbo Southerner, once in office, would treat them as shabbily as has the incumbent Yoruba Southerner. For the Igbo to achieve their symbol of complete political rehabilitation, they will have to allay those Northern fears. For historical reasons, the time is not yet ripe for rapprochement between the Southwest and the Southeast. So, without the North, an Igbo Presidency will remain nothing more than a fond dream.

19. (C) A close Babangida associate told us recently that Former Head of State Babangida is trying to broker a solution. The proposed arrangement would reverse the regional division of the ticket in 2007 but without the same

individuals on the ticket. IBB reportedly has Ekweume in mind as President and Umaru Shinkafi as the preferred number two. IBB reportedly has decided, for now, not to run. Given their age and long experience in supporting roles, IBB likely believes both Ekweume and Shinkafi will be pliable "team players" and will not seek second terms. This tack would preserve a "vacancy at Aso Rock" for 2007, by which time, his supporters believe, the controversy surrounding IBB will have abated. An Ekwueme/Shinkafi ticket would also end most of the (limited) elite support for former Head of State Buhari's candidacy.

WHERE HAVE ALL THE ISSUES GONE?

120. (C) All recent discussions with politicians invariably center on the presidential campaign. Remarks of politicians in both camps, while fecund with regard to power politics, tend to be sterile when it comes to substantive issues such as poverty alleviation and economic reform, not to mention foreign policy. Most politicians' forays into substance are brief and concentrate on the allegedly poor job that the opponent will do or is doing. Daily newspapers and weekly magazines are replete with reporting on the presidential politicking. Yet, the dribble of ink devoted to actual issues is minimal when compared to pool devoted to the machinations of the political class.

121. (C) Upon observing the tenor and tactics of the presidential campaign so far, further democratization will require the gradual transformation of Nigeria's political culture in two basic ways. First, the Nigerian political system remains a very closed shop -- a person needs a lot of money or personal connections to enter it. The elitism that governs the current system must be eroded so that more people from various walks of life can enhance the mix. Second, political affiliations need to be based more on issues and less on ethnic and regional considerations. Realistically, this will take time and progress will be gradual. However, it was hoped that the 2003 elections would be another link in this concatenation of strengthening Nigerian democracy. Sadly, this is not happening.

122. (C) The President's bare-knuckle strategy, personified by the unprincipled Anenih, and the opposition's regional axis approach, personified by the Machiavellian Babangida, have placed the process of genuine democratization in "spiritual deepfreeze." While neither side is devoid of issue content, efforts to delineate substantive differences are pro forma. The two camps operate on a different plane. Basically, the President's campaign is using the party machinery and the tools of office to create a nationwide network of incumbents that will help each other get reelected, with the connivance of hand-picked electoral officials. On the other hand, the opposition is promoting ethnic populism by appealing to the base instincts of two (Igbo and Hausa/Fulani) of Nigeria's three main ethnic groups. Thus, despite increasingly frenetic electioneering, somehow the idea of crafting an appeal to entire Nigerian electorate has been lost in shuffle. Because of this, many people sense that, though the politicians are energetically fighting each other, neither side is really fighting for the interests of the average Nigerian or the country as a whole.

ANDREWS